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Peeking into the Mail

Looking fit but jowly, former Attorney General John Mitchell returned last week to the marble-walled Senate hearing room where he had been a star witness before the Watergate committee. This time Mitchell came to discuss another kind of conspiracy—the FBI and CIA history of illegally opening and photographing the mail of American citizens.

The problem for the Senate Intelligence Committee was that former CIA Director Richard Helms had testified earlier that, in June of 1971, he told then Attorney General Mitchell of the mail operation and Mitchell raised no objections. But Mitchell denied knowledge of the mail openings, claiming that Helms had mentioned only the CIA practice of photographing unopened pieces of mail, which is legal.

The mail openings persisted from 1953 until 1973. In all, the outsides of 2,705,726 pieces of mail were legally photographed. But the CIA also opened up and photographed another 215,000 pieces of mail.

FBI officials revealed to the committee that they had their

own mail surveillance. The agency began in 1940 to inspect (but not open) the letters and packages of those Americans who, in its opinion, "might be willing to sell information to a foreign power." Eventually the FBI set up mail-inspection operations in eight cities, and its targets came to include antiwar demonstrators as well as people mailing pornography. Even though former FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover stopped the program in 1966, the FBI continued to receive information that the CIA had gathered in its mail openings.

Meantime, a House subcommittee looking into the secret Government monitoring of international cables and phone calls was told by its investigators that for years agents of either the FBI or the National Security Agency had visited the Washington offices of RCA Global Communications Inc. at 3 a.m. each day to photograph the cables that interested them. Similarly, the investigators said, FBI agents went to ITT World Communications Inc. in Washington every day and collected copies of all cables going to and coming from a selected list of countries. The practices apparently were continued until last spring, when the pressure of congressional investigations brought them to a halt.

MITCHELL TAKING OATH BEFORE TESTIFYING

